Herbert F. Tucker

Department of English

University of Virginia

Poetic Data and the News from Poems: A *For Better for Verse* Memoir

1

At first, it was all about the homework. In a course introducing poetry to students who had little if any disciplined exposure to English metrics, we would spend a Thursday going over the nuts and bolts of scansion. I would set a passage from Keats or Dickinson or Herrick for them to triple-space, scan, and submit at our next meeting the following Tuesday. I would mark up the submissions with grim despatch for return on Thursday, when we would have the best-humored time we could going over a range of problems the exercise had disclosed. At the top of the range were the subtleties of verbal and vocal interpretation that scansion underscores and that prosodic vocabulary makes efficiently available for analytic consideration and debate – in short, the matter I actually wanted the course to engage. But teaching at that level would nearly always mean teaching less engaging things for a while first. We had to bushwhack our way up to the top, over awkwardnesses of the sort any new learner of an unfamiliar skill has to get past: how to work a trochaic or anapestic substitution, or balance the books with spondee-pyrrhic pairing – ropes that one learns to handle by practice.[1] Practice took the form of group work in class on given poems, and of the aforementioned homework; and right there was the rub. The lapse of a week between receiving an assignment and getting it back corrected, a long span by any pedagogical measure, can be aeonically long within the embattled field of undergraduate attention. For all but the most

gifted or eager learners, the procedures of scansion were so non-intuitive, and the associated prosodical vocabulary so arcane, that the return of an assignment often found my charges discouragingly close to the point where they had been when the assignment was made to begin with. The time lag was killing us.

So it had gone with me, three decades more or less, plugging away with indifferent results at the transmission of skills that I persisted in teaching because even my mediocre rate of success fed cherished interlocking convictions: that scansion takes a reader further than any comparable practice can into the formal life of metered verse; and that the very clunkiness of scansion's apparatus bids fairest to free students of the complementary fetters they tend to drag across the classroom threshold: on one hand the despotic grip of school-bred hermeneutic expectation (*libido interpretandi*, as Augustine should have called what Whitman did call the lust to "get at the meaning of poems"),[2] and on the other hand the no-account slumber of a generalized expectation about verbal beauty that, having mumbled something about "sing-song" or "flow," lapses into aphasia. Scansion's wake-up call to the educable ear, its analytic mapping of structure and proportion, and its invitation to reconnect these formal first-derivative digital abstractions to the analog rhythms of breath and pulse, put students' birthright of what Blake called the "improvement of sensual enjoyment" back within intellectual reach.[3] So I believe; so I believed; so I slogged on.

I doubt the word "digital" would have come so pat into those last sentences had not the practical frustration of a pedagogical conviction driven me a couple of years ago into the arms of Charles Babbage & Co. Enlightened souls within my university's computational wing had for some time practiced affirmative action among the humanities faculty, tempting us with offers of course relief and funded technical support to submit proposals for digital projects with an application to teaching. I had applauded this summons, but only from the sidelines. Then one day

it occurred to me, having drummed out pentameters with digits left and right on more desktops than I could remember, that poets with good reason called versification "numbers," that meter was a counting device of a quite mechanical sort, and indeed that computation and prosody rode alike on a binary system with a remarkable capacity to extract the most complex functions from a sequence of the simplest elements: ones and zeroes, stresses and slacks. Prosodically analytic criticism was an art, for the reader as well as the poet; but it was an art whose practice presupposed the craft skills of scansion. Acquiring these skills involved an indispensable modicum of rote mechanical drill, and in supervising their acquisition a teacher could – perhaps nowadays should – be replaced by a machine.

I'm not a Luddite, but I am a John Henrician. The human being belongs for me, irreplaceably, at the hub of the work of humanist exchange, whether between scholar and text or between instructor and pupil. But – really, therefore – sound ergonomics means maximizing *quality time* within that work: i. e., the time devoted to improving the qualitative description, correlation, and evaluation of the objects humanists study. To build a machine capable of teaching scansion might be a way of rendering unto quantity the things that are quantity's, measured out as they are in English verse by the accentual-syllabic foot and the line; and thus a way of more liberally rendering unto quality the things that are, indubitably, quality's yet that require a certain quantitative competence before a student can be qualified to discuss them.

In some respects, moreover, it occurred to me that an interactive tutorial machine might outdrill my preceptorial John Henry, all steamed up and fixing to die with the marker in his hand, Lord, Lord. It came down, as I said at starting, to the homework. The machine promised to iron that lethal lag time out of the trial-and-error process through which a thing like scansion is imparted. As with paper-based homework, students could work at their own pace and at hours of their choosing.

But now the feedback would be instantaneous. A hazarded pattern of stressed and

slack syllables would be marked either right or wrong on the spot, sending the

student either forward with confidence into the next line or else back into the

puzzling line for a fresh recital, a keener hearing, and better luck next time, with

hopes of success pinned not to guesswork but to regularly reinforced incremental

learning.[4] The lineal, stepwise delivery of this feedback, I further thought, would

also bring a collateral boon. In contrast to the palimpsest of erasures and

overwritings that I ordinarily gave back on that black Thursday – a semiotic thicket

that became the more bewildering the more error-riddled a needy student's

performance had been – instant feedback at the end of each line might focus

attention not just *when* it was needed most but *where*. Checking in regularly for

approval every few feet might habituate students to read verse by the line, which is

how I am convinced poets ordinarily write it. Learning, as Pope says, to "live along

the line," they might get closer to the forge where art is made.[5] And, in case of

temperamental mismatch or some other impasse, the student could make a fresh

start by choosing, from a library of options graduated by difficulty, another poem of

like kind that was ranked easier.

2

That's about how far I had thought into the matter when I won a grant from

the Teaching and Technology Initiative at the University of Virginia for 2008-2009 to

design and build *For Better for Verse*.[6] This grant afforded access to a set of savvy

helpers who were as generous in imagining unglimpsed possibilities as they were in

drawing on the technical know-how that made these visible.[7] They were full of

ideas. Why not use that basic binary tool the mouse, assigning different clicks to

stress and slack marks? If we agreed to give the syllabification of words away for

free (and I was: the dictionary did as much already), then for foot division the cursor

4

could move through syllables that glowed at its arrival, while for superscript scansion marking it could move through a likewise glowing space above each syllable. Wouldn't color be *utile* as well as *dulce*, say when it came to distinguishing caesura from foot divisions? Why not add audio recitation, or for blank-verse dramatic poetry why not add video performance? Well, I had reservations about supplying an expert's oral interpretation for every poem; that could turn into a distraction, or crutch, for students I wanted to help step out on their own. Yet I had to concede that different strokes reached different folks – curious minds get the idea about stress by various pathways – and that being read to by an audio file now and then might be one way of learning to read out loud (and eventually in soft) to oneself. Should there be a test or assignment component? Should the instructor be able to spy on students' work, in order to see how they got on? I thought not: the site should be a place for self-directed exercise, a studio or gym rather than an examination chamber; a quiz in class could show soon enough who was training well or ill.

Was this to be for my students only, for UVa students only, or for the former student teaching high school in Spokane, the retired uncle in Naples, or anybody who happened on the site? Unto these last, I decreed, be it given also: let open access reign in the commons of pedagogy, even if it does oblige me to compose a brisk introduction to prosody, a scansion field guide, and a glossary of terms making the site more or less self-explanatory. That answer, like many a broad-minded decision life challenges us to make, very soon prompted a caution. This time it was University Counsel's stern reminder of the legal limits that internet publication places on fair-use doctrine. *Thou Shalt Not Infringe Copyright* was a commandment that cost the site some fine teaching examples from Frost and Auden, Yeats and Parker; but the good news was that it left unforbidden half a millennium of the best poetry in English, and nearly everything published before verse went free. My associates'

ideas gave me some new ones too: pop-up comments from the commiserating or felicitating prof, materializing from his wizardly screen to shake hands only after a passage of special trickiness or beauty had been negotiated; an option to indicate rhyme scheme; a toggle switch, available once the whole poem was successfully scanned, that would highlight in pure gold those places where rhythm departs from meter in ways that might enrich next week's essay in poetic interpretation.

That was the fun part – that, and working with web designers at a local firm who were smart, and game, but had never lost much sleep over the principles of versification. It was instructive to move from my bubble into theirs, where I found deep breaths and giant backward steps necessary in order to find a standpoint at which we could all convene in confidence that we were on, or gazing on, the same page. Their work was to build handsome accessories, and a browser-friendly frame, for the real guts of the site, a black box that would house what was known among us as the Application. The Application would display a passage of verse chosen by the student from an adjacent table of contents, match the student's in-put pattern of stresses and feet for a given line against the correct answers we had taught it, and promptly reward a correct answer with a green checkmark or flag a faulty one with a red X. Getting the Application to work was the job of a relay of long-suffering UVa programmers, who had not only to make it consistent with itself but also to make it compatible with the prickly eccentricities of Internet Explorer while retaining the good graces of Firefox.

Of these essential procedural labors I saw no more than I could understand, which was virtually nil. But then I had my hands full with the Application's other side, the one laden with what Marshall McLuhan might have called the message of the medium, or Fredric Jameson the content of the form, but that I shall call here, in a first real payoff for the *VP* reader who has trod the anecdotal path with me this far, the *poetic data*. Even somebody who is strongly disposed to grant, even celebrate,

the rich density of a poem's textuality will be struck by the accompanying illustration, which displays the markup that *4B4V* requires for the six lines comprised by stanza two of Browning's 1845 poem "Meeting at Night":

```
<lg n="2" type="sestet" met="-+(4/4/4/4/4/4)" rhyme="abccba">

    <l n="7" met="-+-+-+-+" real="--+-++--+">

      <seg met="-+" real="--+">Then a mile </seg>

      <seg met="-+">of warm </seg>

      <seg met="-+" real="+-">sea-<sb/>scent<sb/></seg>

      <seg met="-+">ed <rhyme label="a">beach;</rhyme></seg>

    </l>

    <l n="8" met="-+-+-+-+" real="++-+--+-+">

      <seg met="-+" real="++">Three fields </seg>

      <seg met="-+">to cross </seg>

      <seg met="-+" real="--+">till a farm </seg>

      <seg met="-+">ap<sb/><rhyme label="b">pears;</rhyme></seg>

    </l>

    <l n="9" met="-+-+-+-+" real="-+--+-+++">

      <seg met="-+">A tap </seg>

      <seg met="-+" real="--+">at the pane, </seg>

      <seg met="-+">the quick </seg>

      <seg met="-+" real="++">sharp <rhyme label="c">scratch</rhyme></seg>

    </l>

    <l n="10" met="-+-+-+-+" real="-++--+-+">
```

```
      <seg met="-+">And blue </seg>

      <seg met="-+" real="+-">spurt of </seg>

      <seg met="-+">a light<sb/></seg>

      <seg met="-+">ed <rhyme label="c">match,</rhyme></seg>

   </l>

   <l n="11" met="-+-+-+-+" real="--+-+--+-+|--+++--+-+">

      <seg met="-+" real="--+">And a voice </seg>

      <seg met="-+">less loud, </seg>

      <seg met="-+" real="--+">thro' its joys </seg>

      <seg met="-+">and <rhyme label="b">fears,</rhyme></seg>

   </l>

   <l n="12" met="-+-+-+-+" real="--+++-+-+">

      <seg met="-+" real="--+">Than the two </seg>

      <seg met="-+" real="++">hearts beat<sb/></seg>

      <seg met="-+">ing each </seg>

      <seg met="-+">to <rhyme label="a">each!</rhyme></seg>

   </l>

   </lg>
```

The unfamiliar tagging labels in brackets (*seg* for the line segment that is a poetic foot, *lg* for the line group that is a stanza, and so on) are tools adapted, with profound gratitude, from a previous generation of cyber-toilers for the Text Encoding Initiative, who in turning their hands to what the representation of verse might entail in XML foresaw nearly every eventuality our project ran up against.[8] *Met* and *real*

are our scratched-up code for meter and rhythm, respectively, with plus and minus signs for stressed and unstressed syllables.

Never mind the tags, though; look instead at the magic forest of data that exfoliates from the prosodist's nerdy concentration on the trees, the knots in the bark, the veins in the leaves. Teaching the Application what counts entails making the already analytic scanning process a full order of magnitude more analytic than it ever ordinarily is to the consciousness of a reader. For the programmed instructions a computer needs to follow, a poetic foot requires a line of code, a line requires so to speak a stanza of code, and a six-line stanza takes up on our page some three dozen lines, or six squared, assuming more or less the proportions of a mid-length lyric. In other words, the process of XML coding sheerly for meter and rhyme spreads out in the most graphically suggestive fashion how much *information* lies coiled in the data bank that is a poem. And this lush display leaves untouched other aspects of versification like alliteration and anaphora, much less the higher-level interplay, where critical interpretation takes place, between these patterns and those of statement, imagery, and affect.

Consider how these many poetic dimensions come together at the juncture I bet most readers remember Browning's poem for, the onomatopoeia and vowel coloring of the central couplet:

> A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
>
> And blue spurt of a lighted match.

(ll. 9-10)

One greets the poetic lines, rid of their grotesque coding, with something of an anxious lover's relief, as the intuitive prompts of form and meaning slide back into familiar alignment. From scratch to spurt: the spondee in the last foot of line 9, and

the spondee-like effect made in line 10 by the second-foot trochee, emphasize the match's friction and ignition as discrete, sequenced instants with which, for a synchronized second or two, the reader's recitation keeps real time – the whole interval being erotically charged by the tryst in the lyric plot and teased up, for good measure, by some anapestic flutter on either flank. Thus to feel verbal imagination reunite what data analysis has put asunder is to appreciate afresh how extraordinary a sophistication inhabits ordinary poetic reading. Renewed respect for the integrative complexity of this act – attending to the text as if every syllable might matter somatically as well as semantically – can strengthen a teacher's forbearance and resolve at once. Is it any wonder students have so much difficulty with the tricky, reciprocal dismantling and reassembly that scansion asks them to perform? No; and that, to resume an essential point, is exactly why we ask it of them: for the sake of that heightened appreciation which lies on the far side of analysis, but to which nothing but analysis affords access.

3

To sharpen a feel for the intricate density enriching great verse is the task of a lifetime, as of a semester: prosody makes students of us all if we will let it. The work of sharpening needs a whetstone, and in furnishing *4B4V* I have occasionally found one in the resistance that the Application programming and its associated markup language have posed. Charles Hartman tells in *Virtual Muse*[9] how he handed his computer a dictionary, fed it some syntax and lexically randomizing algorithms, and oversaw its generation of phrases and lines whose attractive strangeness was due to the machine's total want of inhibition, i. e. to the indiscriminateness that came with its very rigidity. It took a poet's eye to sort out the few results that were passing strange from the many that were just flunking strange. Still, the same faculty of imaginative judgment that was able to sift good outputs from bad would

arguably have kept the poet, left to his own devices, from generating those same outputs to begin with. It was Hartman's collaboration with the computer, in a double dialectic of suppleness with automatism, censorship with recklessness, that carried his virtual muse into topographies he would not have visited on his own.

To compare great things with small, something of this kind has happened to me once or twice in developing *4B4V*. It happened most dramatically with the poem I think the toughest on the site, even among the special-challenge category to which, I grant it, not all users will advance. The poem in question, Hardy's "The Voice," dates from 1914 but will surely be grandfathered, with many a precedent, into a *VP* essay. In order to gauge how hard I found it to outfit this superb lyric for on-line tutorial purposes, the reader must first grasp a principle – at bottom, a choice between equal and opposite prejudices – which I had long advocated in my classes before realizing, at an early stage in site development, that I must expressly pass it along to my virtual tutee too. This is my right-handed prejudice for rising over falling feet as the default expectation in English metrics; for iambic and anapestic meters, that is, over trochaic and dactylic ones. Not that the latter fail to exist. I happily concede, especially in these pages, that Browning's "One Word More" is written in trochaic pentameter, although with him I am quick to remark its oddity within an oeuvre, indeed a whole anthologized library, of iambic-pentameter works vastly outnumbering it. More to the point, in *4B4V* I firmly insist that Shelley's "Life of Life" lyric from *Prometheus Unbound* is written in trochaic tetrameter: when the poem's dropdown meter box is invoked, that and only that answer gets the green light for correct.

My rising-rhythm preference has to be trotted out when it comes to genuinely ambiguous lines, and more rarely whole poems, that are composed to variations on a certain gnarly lyric tune deeply rooted in the English vernacular tradition. Take the first line of a Blake poem, dating from the 1790s but well known only since Victorian

times, and not on the site but usefully illustrative here. The poem is explicitly a *Song of Experience* and deliberately demotic in its manner, which engages the prosodic ambiguity I mean to highlight:

<pre>
        /   u   /   u   /   u   /
        I was angry with my friend
</pre>

("A Poison Tree," l. 1)

The regular alternation of slack with stress in duple rhythm is obvious, but where oh where do the feet go? On one hand a select minority of readers, often trained I find in European classical music, will begin at the beginning downbeat, make as many trochees as possible, and then, coming up short for foot four, declare the line catalectic with terminal truncation. (So runs the shorthand jargon, no worse than others, that the *4B4V* glossary and discussions employ: it means here that the last trochee is missing its slack.) On the other hand a robust majority of readers, their habits formed perhaps on the Africanizing backbeat of blues and rock, look to the end and read the line iambically with the acephalous catalexis of a premised initial slack.[10] Both camps agree that recitation should pause for a ghostly unstressed beat between lines, a sort of prosodic rest whose postulation keeps the meter in order; some feel it at the beginning of the line, some at the end, that's all; and for most purposes the mooted point doesn't make any difference.

For prosodic analysis, however, it makes a conspicuous difference, one with which I had to wrestle in getting the poems of this sort in *4B4V* coded consistently so as to give the novice a firm footing. I went of course with my prejudice, to which I also ascribe the authority of consensus, for rising rhythm. Admittedly ambiguous lines such as Blake's above, or the first three lines of his celebrated "Tyger," or half the lines in Shakespeare's "Full Fathom Five," were in every case coded as metrically

iambic. This uniformity gave the student something to depend on – perhaps

eventually to rebel against – and it also spared a world of trouble when, sooner or

later, each of these poems produced a line like this:

$$u \quad / \quad u \quad / \quad u \quad / \quad u \quad /$$

I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

That line 2 of "A Poison Tree" falls into perfect iambic tetrameter resolves, to my

satisfaction at least, the prosodic doubts raised by line 1. And, should further proof

be needed, the next two lines of the poem faithfully recapitulate the same lesson, as

reluctant skeptics may work out for themselves right now in the space provided:
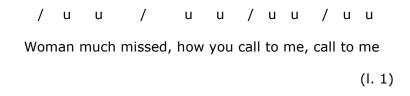

I was angry with my foe:

I told it not, my wrath did grow.

Suffice it to say that anybody who wants to declare lines 2 and 4 trochaic will have a

lot of explaining to do – an embarrassment that may in itself suffice to show why a

free-standing online scansion tutorial designed to foster modest proficiency should

endorse my rising-rhythm prejudice when handling lines like 1 and 3. The computer,

I reasoned, needed much the same thing the student did: clear and consistent

directions about the unwobbling pivot of *meter*, whose rigor was an expedient worth

embracing so that *rhythm* might wind its tendrils along, but also against, the firm

trellis of metrical structure. After all, scansion itself was an expedient, and is: a

means to discipline attention, and thereby refine it.

I'll return to this truth at the end of the paper. Here I must tell how I

rediscovered it the hard way, and received a salutary shake to my confident

prejudices, at a fairly late point in our staging process once the *4B4V* prototype was

up and running. That was when the challenge of coding "The Voice" brought my

rising-rhythm bias into direct conflict with the intransigence of the mechanical

system. Hardy's poem presents a triple-rhythm variant of the vernacular conundrum

just outlined:

(u u) / u u / u u / u u /

Saying that now you are not as you were

(l. 2)

Tetrameter, clearly, as in Blake; and (while a trochee-iamb pairing is possible for the

first two feet) most probably a catalectic rising line, again as in Blake but now

involving anapests rather than iambs, and thus premising two ghost slacks rather

than one at the head of the line (parenthetized above) to fill the number of anapestic

feet out to four.[11]   With one exception – to which my next paragraph returns with a

vengeance – each even-numbered line in the first three stanzas of "The Voice" fits

this rising pattern. The fit is the more plausible because each preceding (odd-

numbered) line actually supplies the ghostly supplement up front, as follows:

/ u u / u u / u u / u u

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me

(l. 1)

Those last two syllables, bias and habit whispered in my ear, are prosodical ante, a

line of metrical credit on which line 2 teaches its even-numbered successors to draw

as the borrowed first half of their initial anapest. If we treat the terminal double

slack as a loan carried forward to the ensuing line, we not only save the anapestic

tetrameter but garner from it an interpretive bonus. For, given his poem's theme of

14

marital haunting, Hardy has with characteristic ingenuity made feminine endings an earnest of uncanny wifely initiatives; acephalous catalexis becomes a prosodic trope for the absence/presence of a remarried widower's paranormal experience.

An attractive reading, I thought; but while I was contentedly pursuing it through the second stanza the very mechanical rigor I had taken pride in played me false:

> Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
> Standing as when I drew near to the town
> Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
> Even to the original air-blue gown!
>
> (ll. 5-8)

The justly famous last line is the problem. Everyone admires that "air-blue gown," thoughtful readers wonder at its sylphine anticipation of the revenant voice's collusion with the element of wind, and metrically susceptible readers savor how the line mimes the ruffle and bell of its implied aerial stir. Only for the writer of prosodic code does the line pose a stubborn stumbling block: namely, what to do with four consecutive slacks. True, a double elision worthy of Donne at his crammedest can rewrite the line as

   (u u)   / | u   u /|u u / | /   /
           Ev'n to th'original air-blue gown

and thereby scan it into conformity with my anapestic premise – always providing that the spondee "blue gown" be acceptable as a substituted final foot. Taken altogether this rather Ptolemaic bill of epicyclical changes (including, remember, the

double-slack bookkeeping at the head of the line) left my scansion teetering at the edge of bankruptcy. Still, it was just barely solvent, and left to myself I might have retained it.

But *4B4V* wasn't buying elision. In XML a string of characters either is coded a syllable or is not; within the Application either the mouse-driven cursor makes the airspace above a syllable glow to receive slack or stress, or else it doesn't. If we told the Application that "Even" and "the or-" were monosyllables, it would take our word for it; but then a human user's incredulous confusion over the result could spoil the whole exercise. The computational binarism behind the Application cuts no more slack to elision in Hardy than it does in Donne, for whose gasping apostrophes ("o'erthrow mee,'and bend" as two iambs in *Holy Sonnet* 14) it also has no use.[12] With Donne's iambic sonnets it always proved possible to spell the forbidden elision out as a permitted anapest. But with Hardy the base was anapestic already; there was nowhere to hide the manifest run of four consecutive slack syllables in a tetrameter line already laden with an extra stress by the late spondee. At one point I fondly thought I had found a refuge:

/ u   u | u   u /|u u / | /   /
Even to the original air-blue gown!

(l.8)

Since a trochee is the most routine of first-foot substitutions in an iambic line, why not confer the same right on a dactyl in an anapestic one? This dodge actually felt workable until I remembered, what I trust my reader has not forgotten, how the whole house of cards depended on the routine infusion of double slacks from the line above (in this case "you then" from line 7). Against the pitiless audit of syllables

that the TEI coding exacted, my rising-rhythm scansion of "The Voice" was a Ponzi scheme collapsing under its own weight.

I suffered the curse of getting just what I had asked for; the very mechanicalness of the machine I had ordered slued around and hit me in the back of the head. Might that be where the prejudices live? It seems so, because it was frustration at what *4B4V* was teaching me about a favorite poem that brought me at last to abandon the flimsy security of my rising-rhythm rule. "The Voice" must be that rare thing in English verse, a poem in dactyls that is neither comical nor indebted – as are, say, the nifty clackety hexameters of Clough's long poems – to a burlesque of the classical tradition. Line 1 must be just what it looks like, a dactylic tetrameter; and so then must line 2, whose double-slack catalexis belongs at the end and not, where I had wanted to put it, at the beginning. On this scansion line 8 remains anomalously hypermetrical, and inescapably so, its first foot a great thumb or superdactyl with four slacks instead of the prescribed two; but this becomes the only special accommodation the prosodist has to make in these three stanzas.

Furthermore, the premise of a falling dactylic rhythm prepares much better than a rising anapestic one for the stunning effect of Hardy's fourth stanza. There the poem retrenches to a short measure ($a^3b^3a^4b^3$) whose feminine endings consort equally with a dactylic or a trochaic meter and so leave readers bemused – rather like the poet – over just what they are listening to:

> Thus I; faltering forward,
>
> Leaves around me falling,
>
> Wind oozing thin through the thorn to norward,
>
> And the woman calling.

(ll. 13-16)

Hardy's indentation points to something that a scansion also lets us hear more acutely: how the third line here harks back to – revoices, *recalls* – the dactylic rhythms that have prevailed in stanzas 1-3, and thus how trochaic-dactylic interplay rehearses the ambivalence with which the speaker is poised between hallucinatory longing and the reality principle. This intrapoetic reprise, whereby falling rhythm is Hardy's way of catching himself "faltering forward," would have been much harder to catch for the doctrinaire rising-rhythmist I used to be until a machine taught me better.

4

Fine, but does the work? The answer depends on what is meant by *work*. Mechanically things are looking good, thanks in part to a series of pilot groups of Virginia students, some of them extracurricular volunteers and some victimized through their hapless choice to enroll in my course, who have helped us troubleshoot and fortify the program. The software is quite sturdy now, and access to it is simple: reports trickling back from my campus and around the web-wide world suggest that those who want to use *4B4V* can indeed do so just about anywhere. Certain proposals tendered by students and colleagues have been turned aside – a point-scoring system whereby this space, like others it distantly resembles within the video-gaming arena, might exploit the competitive impulse; a cache of correct answers to succor the desperate or gratify the short-cutter; an adjacent forum for commentary, dissent, complaint. But others have been taken under advisement and to some degree incorporated. While outright wikipedagogy – letting any comer who is willing to master the code introduce new poems (and scansions), or alter existing ones – poses for now too much danger to quality control, related franchise options are intriguing. We might, for example, license a separate but linked version of the Application to an acting coach who wanted to train Shakespearean performers on a

broader platform of speeches in dramatic verse than our menu includes, or to a creative writing teacher who was preparing students to anatomize each other's newly written sonnets and villanelles.

So, yes, the site does *work*, and dependably enough in technical respects to make these two last examples imaginable in principle (however labor-intensive in practice). At the same time, one precious feature these two examples have in common – a presumption of strong commitment on the student's part – underscores by contrast a large and abiding imponderable. The *4B4V* site *works* for the student who has, or can be induced to acquire, a lively interest in *working at it*; who believes, or can be brought to believe, that scanning verse is a skill worth fighting for – worth, that is, submitting to the unavoidable annoyances, sometimes substantial and prolonged, that arise from imperfectly understood instructions, or elder poets' weird addiction to outmoded lexical and syntactic habits, or an inexperienced feel for the passion, and whimsy, with which imagined life may inflect imagined speech. When trial-and-error is only that, the errant quit trying. This, I dare say, is an outcome more likely now than formerly, for reasons to do with the stamina-deficit that manifests among us today as attention-deficit's surlier sibling – yet that, I dare at the same time hope, is a syndrome that lies within the poetry-study's alleviating reach.

Because poetry tends to concentrated shortness, it can in a comparatively prompt and full way reward the attention it demands. This gratifying rate of return on invested mental energy affords to verse some promise of mitigating the plague of distractability that afflicts contemporary culture across the board, and that academic culture is anything but exempt from. Somebody who has learned to attend to a poem in detail, to read with care over an extended interval, has ipso facto cultivated a talent that is rare today because much of daily life in general, and a whole lot that passes for life on the internet in particular, conspire to depress it. Kindling the flame

of attention, then tending it once kindled, give pedagogical exercise to the "certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind" to which Wordsworth designed that *Lyrical Ballads* should minister.[13] Such exercise participates in the sustaining modern function of poetry as Arnold saw it: "to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us."[14] The poetic data I have been highlighting here do not come close to exhausting what William Carlos Williams called "the news from poems," for lack of which "men die miserably every day"[15]; but theirs is the mediation, the currency and frequency, by which that news arrives. Tuning students in to that formal bandwidth, and turning them on more largely to poetry as such, are reciprocally dependent interventions. Neither will work for long without the other; and, if Wordsworth, Arnold, and Williams are right, both have a strong claim on literature instructors whether or not they profess prosodic expertise. It's on the teacher avowedly inexpert – convinced in principle that versification matters yet hesitant in practice when push comes to shove at syllabus time – that the success of *4B4V* will actually depend. The site is here to tell you that the prosodic game is worth the curricular candle. Hazarding embarrassment in class now and then may be the very best way to show students that the risk is worth running, that an inside knowledge of poetry is something to fight for.

So does the site work? Reader, that's up to you now. Say not the struggle nought availeth. Keep the flame on the discipline's hearth alive. Which is to say, don't forget the homework:

<div align="center">http://www.prosody.lib.virginia.edu/</div>

[1] Further down still lay obstacles imbedded in habit if not in neurology: genuine difficulty hearing one's own recitation, where a student who can read lines perfectly well aloud is baffled when asked to transcribe his reading in stresses and slacks; basic aural incomprehension (not rare in non-native speakers) of stress as a feature of English pronunciation. Impediments like these are often eroded by practice but seldom altogether; an epiphanic breakthrough is rare. Where they prove intractable I remain at a loss, give the student a bye, and look for better results when we turn in a couple of weeks to larger poetic structures and figurative language.

[2] "Song of Myself," l. 32, in Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 64. Saint Augustine writes in Book 1 of *The City of God* about *libido sciendi*, *libido dominandi*, and *libido sentiendi*. Hermeneutics feeds the first two; where prosody has a soft spot, it is for the third.

[3] *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14, in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake,* ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 38. Subsequent quotations from Blake cite this edition.

[4] Although nearly every practical modification introduced during the development and implementation of *For Better for Verse* has bent towards flexibility and forgiveness, its original predilection for rigor – a.k.a. stiffness, alias structure – remains strongly marked. The amazing subtleties of effect great poets have achieved by finding the give in a prosodic system will eventually flash on a diligent student's mind. First, however, she needs to discern the system. Thus our yellow-light response to certain inputs lets her know a response, while legitimate, is sub-optimal; the program hopes she will proceed undiscouraged to hear the line a better (usually more rhythmically inventive) way.

[5] *Essay on Man* 1.218, in Alexander Pope, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. William K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1951), p. 135.

[6] *For Better for Verse* was launched at the beginning of 2010 in a public version to which additions and improvements continue to be made. The reader is urged to visit it soon, and often: http://www.prosody.lib.virginia.edu/

[7] Beside Yitna Firdyiwek, Joe Gilbert and Bethany Nowviskie in the Scholars' Lab at UVa, I thank anonymously the several graduate assistants whose hours spent in the toils of XML coding were, I must hope, otherwise and better remunerated than at the minimum wage they labored for. And I especially thank my old friend and quondam colleague Charles Hartman, now of Connecticut College, who kindly paid a visit to Charlottesville near the inception of what became *4B4V* to discuss, not only his 1996 book *Virtual Muse: Experiments in Computer Poetry* but also *English Metrics: Hypertext Tutorial and Reference* (1992). The latter, which antedates my web-based site by two decades, was constructed, so to speak, in his garage out of toothpicks and chewing gum (DOS, then Hypercard) and still works just fine. Another invention of Hartman's, the scandalous *Scandroid*, should be immediately rated PG-19 (inaccessible to undergraduates except under express Preceptorial Guidance) by the MLA, the NCTE, the AAUP, and any other body it alarms.

[8] The TEI Consortium homepage is found at http://www.tei-c.org/.   Section P5, "Guidelines for Electronic Text Encoding and Interchange," http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/index.html, contains the protocols that

are followed by *4B4V*, with the exception of one simplifying change in the coding of syllable divisions. See especially subsection 6, "Verse."

[9] See note 7 above.

[10] What I say here about musical proclivities is altogether speculative and rests on a slender basis of informal conversation and hearsay. One supporting anecdote is public, though, and merits citation. The African-American performer and musicologist Taj Mahal, playing a concert in Germany in 19XX, halted the opening bars of "Blues with a Feeling" when he found the audience clapping on downbeats. "Wait, wait, wait. Dies ist schwarze Musik, *zwei* und *vier*," he expostulated, "Everybody's like *one. . . three.* No, no, no. Classical music, yes: Mozart, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, all right. Vladimir Horowitz, *one. . . three.* But schwarze Musik, *one TWO three FOUR,* okay?" [discography pending] The reader who desires not anecdotes but real arguments should consult the searching and, to my mind, largely persuasive treatment by Robert Wallace, "Meter in English," with ensuing discussion by divers hands in David Baker, ed., *Meter in English: A Critical Engagement* (Fayetteville: Univ. of Arkansas Press, 1996).

[11] User's note: *4B4V* doesn't admit this parenthetized no(ta)tion of ghost syllables, because – as my argument is about to lament, or boast – the Application doesn't believe in ghosts. Where no verbally actualized syllable appears, no scansion mark may appear above it. There's no there there.

[12] "Holy Sonnet," poem 171 in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), p. 344.

[13] "Preface to the Second Edition" (1800) of *Lyrical Ballads*, in William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. 1904 Thomas Hutchinson, rev. 1936 Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 735.

[14] "The Study of Poetry" (1880), in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 306. Strong though the *libido interpretandi* was in Arnold, in this some ways palinodic late essay he insistently affirms of the greatest poems what a prosodist might say, that "their special character, their accent, is given by their diction, and, even yet more, by their movement" (p. 314).

[15] "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" (end of Book 1) in William Carlos Williams, *Journey to Love* (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 54.